

The Cat and the Mouse

(or, how I met DTP)

Conrad Taylor : October 2013

Recording available from <http://www.conradiator.com/av/>

Draft script: the recording may deviate slightly from this

This is the fifth in my series of autobiographical monologues.

In the last one I described how I got involved with text composition and typesetting before 1985.

Here, I shall describe how I played a part in what at the time we called the 'desktop publishing' revolution: using personal computers, not only for typesetting, but to design whole pages and publications, with pictures and everything.

That is so commonplace these days that graphic designers starting work today have scarcely if at all known anything else.

But here is my story.

In 1984 I married Sang-usa Suttitanakul, who like most Thai people was better known by her nickname, Noi.

Two economic opportunities opened up to us.

We were invited to join a newly-formed workers' co-operative, founded by Larry Jagan and Tony Kahane, to publish a socialist review of Asian political and economic affairs, called 'Inside Asia'.

Our first office-cum-studio was in Camden Town, but then we moved to the bottom of Pentonville Road, to a building which now houses a school of acting.

Noi and I took on a job-share, handling the design and production of the magazine.

It wasn't the kind of jobshare where the partners take turns in the job. Noi and I worked side by side, quite intensively every second month in the run-up to the publication date, and in the time in between, we used the studio room for our own work projects.

At least, that was the theory.

I took charge of the business of marking up the editorial typescripts, most of which came off Larry Jagan's Amstrad PCW word processor, and we sent them off for typesetting in Kilburn on Dunstan Chan's Compugraphic MCS photosetter.

In my last recording, I described in some detail how these phototypesetting machines worked.

What we got back from there was long rolls of resin-coated photographic bromide paper with the text for each story typeset in a single long column.

Somewhat anachronistically, (and I say that because the term derives from when type was made up of cast bits of lead), we called these 'galley proofs'.

At this point, the workflow split into two.

We made two photocopies of all the typeset material.

The editors and I took one of the photocopies, and carefully proof-read the typesetting, marking up where we needed corrections.

Noi took the other photocopy, chopped it up with a scalpel, and did a trial layout by paste-up of the magazine, also figuring out which of the available photos and graphics we would use, and how they should be re-sized and cropped.

She had a really good eye for use of space, page composition and photo composition.

It then took a few days for us to get back the bromides of the corrected typesetting. Usually to save money, Dunstan and his team didn't run the whole thing out again, but sent us patches to replace the sections where we had detected mistakes.

In the meanwhile, Noi and I would have made a late night visit to the Rye Express women's printing co-op in New Cross, to which we held a spare set of keys.

We used their process camera, or graphic arts camera, to make screened 85-lines-per-inch bromides or PMTs of the photographs we were going to use. I loved using that equipment and I'm going to make a separate recorded account someday about process photography and its now-vanished role in the graphic arts.

We now had all the elements required
to do camera-ready artwork,
and Noi and I shared the job
of pasting this up onto the artboards
using hot-rolled wax as our adhesive.

This was the artwork that we sent to the
Spiderweb print co-op in Finsbury Park,
to be photographed onto lith film and made into printing plates.

The colour covers required a different process,
which I won't go into here.

Meanwhile, we lived in a long, thin flat in Penge,
belonging to Noi's sister Yee
and Yee's husband Tanya Phonanan.

We bought us a brown Burmese kitten
which we named after the fruit of the sugar-palm tree
and while she was young,
we brought her into work each day on the Tube
in a wicker carrying basket: she was our studio cat.

Now I mentioned that we had not just one economic opportunity, but two.

The other was, that through a series of co-incidences
I had met a chap called Colin Ringrose
who was in the business of selling graphic arts supplies,
but also wanted to expand into selling
short one- and two-day workshops
to train ordinary people how to produce publications...

designing, page layout, artworking
and all the stuff Noi and I were doing for Inside Asia
and the ThaiEurope Thai-language magazine —
which we did as a sideline.

Colin had a Swedish business partner,
whom he in turn had met by accident
at a trade fair in Germany.

Björn Karlsson, who owned a print-shop in Gothenburg,
had already started running training courses of this kind in Sweden,
and was wondering if he could expand into the British market
doing the same thing.

Rather than compete, Colin and Björn
decided to go into business together
and Björn's Populär Kommunikation Aktiebolaget
became a part-owner of Popular Communication Courses in the UK.

One afternoon in 1984, Colin introduced me to Björn
at a lunch we had in a pub near Hyde Park
and the upshot was that I became
one of the founding group of PopComm course leaders,
which was an engagement that lasted
for more than 20 years after that.

So now I have set the scene
for how Noi and I met desktop publishing.

It happened like this.

In September or October 1985,
Noi and I visited the Repro 85 show,
an expo for the graphic arts and print production,
which I think was at Earls Court.

Of course we visited the PopComm stand.
We also decided to take a wander around the show floor.

Now, the Gestetner company

(and in a previous recording,
I have said quite a lot about the duplicating machine
which David Gestetner had invented)

— well, they had diversified into supplying photocopiers
and simple printshop platemakers for offset,
and had very recently become excited at the possibilities
offered by the Apple Macintosh line of computers
which Apple had launched in January 1984.

At first, the innovative Mac
with its paper-white bit-mapped display, multiple fonts,
drop down menus and unusual mouse-driven interface
was a very exciting machine,
but generally regarded as an expensive toy
and certainly Noi and I had never seen one.

But earlier that year, two momentous technical developments
had greatly increased the attractiveness of the Mac
to graphic artists in particular.

In collaboration with the Adobe company
founded by computer scientists John Warnock and Chuck Geschke,
Apple brought out the first ever laser printer
to be driven by Adobe's PostScript imaging language.
The Apple Laserwriter originally cost about ten thousand US dollars
but it could print just about any combination of type and images
onto plain paper, at three hundred dots per inch.

And the high price was mitigated
by the ease with which it could be networked — to up to 31 computers at once.

The second development was that Paul Brainerd, formerly involved in developing software systems for newspapers, created a start-up company in Seattle called Aldus Corporation, and in July 1985 they launched Aldus PageMaker, which I think was the first page make-up software that conformed to the slogan 'WYSIWYG' — *What You See Is What You Get*, is how the claim went.

What it meant was that you could sit down at a desk, create a poster or a newsletter entirely on the screen of this little computer, and print it out onto plain paper, using a laser printer sitting at the other end of the desk.

And from this, the term 'desktop publishing' was born.

Now, Gestetner were experimenting with another marketing-oriented name for this method.

Along the lines of CAD, or Computer-Aided Design, they called it CAT, for Computer-Aided Typesetting.

And to adorn their stand at Repro 85 they had brought along some black cardboard silhouette images of cats, in profile, and sat them on top of the Apple Macintoshes, with their tails dangling down on one side.

Now these cats looked quite extraordinarily like the little brown Burmese cat we had at home, and as cat-lovers, we were naturally drawn over to the display.

Manning the Gestetner stand was a very pleasant chap called Andrew James.

As I later learned, he had only quite recently split up with a Korean girlfriend; so, much as Noi and I noticed the cardboard cats, Andrew noticed the Anglo-Oriental couple who were looking at the cats.

He came up to us. 'What do you do?' he asked, or something like that.

I explained that we worked for a magazine he could never possibly have heard of, *Inside Asia*.

'I know *Inside Asia*,' he said, to our surprise, 'I see it on sale at the School of Oriental and African Studies!'

Well, goodness me.

I also explained that I was starting to do industrial-style training workshops in graphic design, typography, layout and print production for Popular Communication Courses.

'That's very interesting,' said Andrew.
'We have this machinery which is great for producing small publications,
and we expect that bosses will buy these
with all sorts of crazy expectations
that having this machine will turn their secretary or PA
into a graphic designer.
Do you think such a person can be taught how to do graphic design?'

I said I did indeed think it could be done,
at least to a reasonable level of proficiency,
and he invited me subsequently to visit
the Gestetner marketing HQ on the Euston Road.

He was very keen for me to write a slim book
which they would publish
and which would be a beginner's guide
to the principles of good design and typography
using Desktop Publishing equipment.

They even loaned us a 512k Macintosh
with an extra floppy disk drive
and this came home with us to Penge
so that I could familiarise myself with the system
and the free software that it shipped with:
MacWrite, MacPaint and MacDraw.

And do you know what our cat did
when she was introduced to the Mac?
She jumped up and sat on it
in exactly the same pose
as the Gestetner cardboard cat.

So that is the tale of the Cat and the Mouse
but it is the start of many stories,
not the end of one.

I don't want to go on for too much longer today,
as I notice that these episodes have been getting quite lengthy,
so I shall wrap up with a few indicative directions
and follow them up in future recordings.

In 1986, 'Inside Asia' was tottering towards business failure,
but the Popular Communication teaching was really taking off.
Noi and I had successfully sold the Penge flat
for Tanya and Yee, and transferred the money to Thailand.
It did mean that we became homeless,
but we had had an offer of spacious accommodation in Manchester.

We had a conversation with our local bank,
and the lady bank manager looked at our business plan
for the business project we called 'Ideography'
and she loaned us five thousand pounds,
and we also had family support from our parents.

In mid-1986, as soon as we set up home in Manchester
on the top floor of our friend Colleen's house
we bought the following:

For about £2,200 + VAT, one Apple Macintosh Plus computer,
with a megabyte of RAM, later expanded to four megabytes...

For £1,350 +VAT, an external hard drive, with a storage capacity of...
wait for it...!
twenty megabytes.

Yes, young listeners, twenty megabytes
whereas your typical USB flash drive these days
costs about sixteen quid
for four hundred times that capacity!

Also, we got a dot-matrix printer
a copy of Aldus PageMaker software
and Microsoft Word 1.05 for Mac
(remember, Microsoft Windows hadn't been invented yet).

Also we equipped two darkrooms,
one with a Danagraf 602 MS repro camera
which stood about chest-high to me,
and an activation-stabilization processor
for making instant bromide shots.

I'm happy to say that this equipment proved immediately useful
in helping to prepare my teaching materials and documentation
for the PopComm courses.

At the end of 1986,
I found myself in Sollentuna, north of Stockholm,
where Populär Kommunikation was holding its first big publishing conference,
the first to run under the title 'Triolog.'

It was a cold winter
and the lake outside was frozen so solid, cars could drive across.
For the most part I stayed snug inside the Sollentuna Star Hotel.

It was a pleasure to meet fellow PopKomm course leaders,
especially our American superstar colleague,
the magazine designer Jan V. White.

'I have a Mac too,' said Jan.
'But I'm darned if I know how to use it.
Which is embarrassing because Letraset corporation
have engaged me to write a book about design grids
to ship with their desktop publishing software, ReadySetGo!'

He was grumbling about having to shell out loads of money
for computer courses back in the USA,
so we cut a deal —
'If I pay your air fare to Connecticut, and Noi's,
can you teach me Mac in the mornings,
and in the afternoons we'll go play and have a holiday?'

You're on, said I, and a very nice holiday we had too.
For me the highlight was a side trip to Cambridge and Boston,
where we were treated to a tour of
the type design and digitization house, Bitstream,
and met their English boss, Matthew Carter.
You may know some of the typefaces he has designed,
such as Georgia, and Verdana.

I think it was also in '86 or '87
that I got invited to give a talk
at a conference organised in England by
the Monotype Corporation.
One of my fellow speakers was the designer John Miles, of Banks and Miles;
he actually did write an early design guide
for newly-fledged Desktop Publishers,
the very thing I had failed to do for Gestetner.

Another of the Monotype conference team
was the Berlin-based type designer Erik Spiekermann.
He told me he was just back from a stint working with Adobe
digitizing the font family Frutiger
using strange kind of cubic equation curves with handles.
He later got me an introduction to Dr Peter Karow,
boss of the German type house URW Unternehmensberatung,
which in time led to my spending a week in Hamburg
learning to fly their Ikarus software.

In April 1987,
another PopComm colleague,
Doig Simmonds who ran the design and medical illustration studio
for the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in London...
he kind-of smuggled me into a special workshop
run by McQueen Systems on behalf of Adobe
where we were introduced to a later version
of the software tool Erik Spiekermann had been trying to describe to me.

That was Adobe Illustrator,
and we each ere given a free copy to go and learn and play with;
and I have used Illustrator from that day to this,
through twenty-six years and umpteen versions
making Illustrator the longest-lived tool in my software toolkit.
But that deserves a story to itself.

It wasn't all that long after that Noi and I made our next trip to Thailand
where we made contact with the Apple distributor for Thailand,
Sahaviraya Systems.

We made them a gift of some Thai-themed PostScript artwork;
in exchange, they gave us some PostScript Thai fonts they had made.
They were designed to work with the Thai version of the Mac operating system
but I used Altsys Fontographer to move the characters around.

And once we had our Apple Mac working in Thai,
Noi was no longer interested in our
big bilingual Olympia Supertype typewriter
which we ended up donating to the Thai Section
of the BBC World Service in Bush House.

It was only natural that Popular Communication
should get more and more involved with the new publishing technology,
and it was my job to lead the way — certainly in the UK.

The first PostScript printer that PopComm bought
was a LaserWriter Plus
and rather than being based in the Bridgnorth office,
it came to live with Noi and me
and got used to prepare quality course materials.

We also designed the PopComm marketing brochure or prospectus
which was sent out by direct mail twice a year
and when the first UK PostScript imaging bureau was set up,
called The Graphics Factory, in West London,
we were one of the first to make use
of its Linotronic 100 imagesetter
to output PageMaker pages to bromide
at 2,540 lines per inch resolution.

At this point I think I will make a break in my story,
though there are many sub-themes to re-visit
in subsequent episodes.

I think you will appreciate however,
it was exciting to be one of Desktop Publishing's pioneers.

I seem to have led a hand-to-mouse existence ever since,
and I have owned five desktop Macs
and six Apple laptops since then.

For me, Desktop Publishing led on to other themes,
including experiments in early telematics,
the Manchester Host system, and the Internet,
the first days of the World Wide Web,
the Standard Generalized Markup Language
participation in the Seybold Publishing Conferences in California...

and membership of various associations
such as the PageMaker User Group
the Electronic Publishing Specialist Group
the British Computer Society,
the Information Design Association,
and much besides.

And the adventure continues!